



---

Policy Failure and Public Support: The Iran-Contra Affair and Public Assessment of President Reagan

Author(s): Richard A. Brody and Catherine R. Shapiro

Source: *Political Behavior*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Dec., 1989), pp. 353-369

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/586163>

Accessed: 17/05/2011 23:10

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=springer>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Springer is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Political Behavior*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# POLICY FAILURE AND PUBLIC SUPPORT: The Iran-Contra Affair and Public Assessment of President Reagan

Richard A. Brody and Catherine R. Shapiro

The Iran-Contra affair is an example of the type of event that is expected to give rise to a "rally" of public opinion behind the president. However, the public's response to this event, uncharacteristically, was a sharp decrease in support for President Reagan. This case study constitutes an attempt to explore the sources of the public opinion response to foreign policy events. Statements of political elites, news coverage and commentary, and public opinion assessments are examined to test the patriotism, priming, and opinion leadership explanations of the rally phenomenon. The actions of opinion leaders appears to provide the best explanation of the differential public response to the Iran-Contra affair.

The news of the Iran-Contra affair that broke in early November 1986 provides an extraordinary opportunity to reexamine the public opinion phenomenon generally known as "rally 'round the flag." Despite the presence of conventionally assumed necessary and sufficient conditions, there was no rally of public opinion. The polls following the initial revelations in the Iran-Contra affair record 15 to 21 percentage-point declines in the president's level of approval. Since the Iran-Contra affair fits all the criteria of a rally event but produced no rally, it can be added to the brief list of cases in which the absence of a rally has given rise to reservations about the patriotism hypothesis as an account of the source of rallies in public support for the president (Brody, 1986b; Brody and Shapiro, 1989). In this article, two alternative hypotheses are provided: priming and opinion leadership. It is argued that the opinion leadership hypothesis provides the best explanation for the Iran-Contra negative rally.

## CRISES AND RALLIES OF PUBLIC OPINION

Mueller (1973) gives us three criteria for identifying crises that ought to

Richard A. Brody and Catherine R. Shapiro, Department of Political Science, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305.

give rise to a rally of public support. He writes, "In general, a rally point must be associated with an event which (1) is international and (2) involves the United States and particularly the president directly; and it must be (3) specific, dramatic, and sharply focused" (p. 209). According to Mueller, events that meet these criteria tend to arouse citizens' feelings of patriotism. In turn, these increased feelings of patriotism result in an increased reluctance to appear critical of the president. One manifestation of this reluctance, then, ought to be a sudden increase in public approval of the incumbent president's "handling of his job"—in other words, a "rally" (Mueller, 1973; Lee, 1977, p. 253).

Kernell (1978) accepts the patriotism account of the rally phenomenon and adds to the Mueller criteria the stipulation that the situation, to be considered an event that can rally the public, must "[make] the front page for at least five consecutive days . . . to guarantee widespread public awareness" (p. 513). Brody has expressed reservations about the validity of the patriotism explanation of the rally and introduced the opinion leadership hypothesis as an alternative to it. However he argues that irrespective of its etiology if a rally, *per se*, is to be distinguished from the gain in public approval of the president that would be expected to follow any successful policy outcome, then one must focus scholarly attention on those cases in which the outcomes of the crisis events appear to be questionable or out-and-out policy failures (Brody 1986a; 1986b, p. 3).

The Iran-Contra affair meets the Mueller-Kernell criteria for an event that ought to give rise to a rally. In addition, it was undoubtedly a policy failure. As the events that comprise the Iran-Contra affair unfolded, various goals for the policy initiative were offered. But whether we accept that the goal of the arms sales was "to increase the clout of Iranian moderates," "to effect the release of hostages held in Lebanon," "to bolster the forces of democratic resistance in Nicaragua," or to achieve any combination of these outcomes, there are few who would argue that the initiative succeeded in achieving these ends. Moreover, while it was not an aim of the arms sales initiative to vitiate the credibility of the president's antiterrorism policy at home and abroad, reduced credibility was an apparent consequence of the shift in policy. The Iran-Contra dealings did not turn out to be a U.S. policy success.

### OPINION LEADERSHIP AND THE RALLY RESPONSE: A THEORY SKETCH

We have developed a straightforward explanation of the phenomenon that is based on two simple premises. First, at any given time, the public bases its political opinions on information that is available and relevant to the opinion. This assumption is supported by experimental and other

empirical work that examines the “priming” of public opinion and the effects of priming on the ingredients entering into evaluations of presidential performance (Iyengar et al., 1984; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1988).

Second, international crisis usually (but do not always) substantially alter the normal partisan character of the information available to the public. While the priming hypothesis addresses the question of which issue areas will be the focus of public evaluations of presidential performance, we believe that the opinion leadership hypothesis is required to account for the direction of change in aggregate opinion (Brody, 1986a). When events are breaking at an unusually rapid pace and when the administration has a virtual monopoly of information about the situation—as for many international crises—opposition political leaders either tend to refrain from critical comment or to make cautiously supportive statements. Opposition spokespersons may be motivated to alter their role-driven critical stance by their patriotism and outrage at the threat to the country and/or their desire not to appear stupid and intemperate when more becomes known about the situation. Opposition political leaders, in other words, have almost no incentive to criticize the president when the news of the crisis first breaks. In fact, they have a substantial incentive to remain silent or to be vaguely supportive of the president, since this support may be, and usually is, withdrawn in the future.

If crises alter the incentives for most opinion leaders to speak out on the issues, they will also affect the normal mix of evaluative policy comment available to the public through news media. When opposition leaders are silent or supportive of presidential action, reporters and editors either must carry an unusually uncritical mix of news about presidential performance or risk the appearance of searching out negative comment for its own sake. Under crisis circumstances finding a “balance” for news originating from the White House or from administration-controlled sources in the field would require the media to violate its own professional norms and practices. Seeking negative comment from other sources, when easily recognized legitimate and credible sources are positive or silent, is both unprofessional and unnecessary. International crises are intrinsically dramatic; hence, reporters and editors are relieved of the need to dramatize stories by reporting political conflict or policy debate between opposing elites. In crises reporters and editors can satisfy their need for interesting news without risking the damaging appearance of being out to get the president.

What expectations flow from the account based on hypothesized shifts in elite incentives under uncertainty and what is the effect of those shifts on evaluative comment available to the public? Quite simply, press and television accounts of the “politics” surrounding the event will be unusually

full of evaluative comments from sources supportive of the president—most often, the president, his cabinet officers, and his press secretary—and/or of bipartisan support for the president's actions. Political figures from whom we would normally expect negative comment on presidential performance will instead be silent or supportive.

Under these circumstances, the public takes its understanding of events from the most credible sources available. When deprived of opinion leadership that criticizes presidential actions, and when the president and his people are the only credible sources, the information available to the public will put the best possible face on failure and a rally can follow. On the other hand, when there is opinion leadership that is critical of the president and his policy, a rally can be forestalled.<sup>1</sup> In short, this theory sketch would lead us to expect that the differences in the response of the public to crisis events are due to substantial differences in the type and level of elite criticism.

### **MEDIA COVERAGE AND THE RALLY PHENOMENON**

Exploration of the hypothesis that elite opinion leadership determines whether or not a rally follows from international events satisfying the Mueller-Kernell-Brody criteria requires (1) that we explain what we mean by "elite," (2) that we look for elite commentary in information sources widely available to the public, and (3) that we preserve the time sequencing of the commentary.

For "elite" we could have easily substituted "source," in the sense that the term is used by reporters and editors. We refer to individuals—often but not exclusively government officials—who by role, experience, or expertise are in a position to comment on matters of public concern and are seen to be in that position by those who would contribute to public understanding of these matters. It is a status that is conferred by election, by appointment, and by selection by the news media. A few such individuals—the president, the vice-president, candidates for the presidency, the majority and minority leadership of the House and Senate, and a few present and former key staff members in the White House—hold this status position across the full range of policy issues. Most other members of the elite have much more circumscribed ranges of expertise and consequently are treated as news sources only in policy areas that match their capabilities.

Thus, on matters of foreign policy, we would expect the news media to seek comments from committee and subcommittee chairs, from ranking members, and from members of Congress who are otherwise prominent on the House Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations Committees and on

the Armed Services and Intelligence Committees of the House and Senate.<sup>2</sup> Of course, key individuals in the Departments of State and Defense also are treated as sources; so, too, are a very limited number of members of the “shadow government”—those, for example, at Brookings or the Arms Control Association. On some issues of foreign policy, academic experts are called upon for comment. The fact that those who produce the news—reporters and editors—ordinarily seek elite commentary helps to satisfy the requirement that a selection of elite comments will be available to the public. Obviously, comments made in academic journals or government documents, but not repeated in mass media, cannot be expected to relate to changes in public evaluations of the president.

Finally, since we hypothesize that the presence of negative critical commentary will reduce the likelihood of a rally, it is important to keep track of when such statements are made, where they are placed in news reports, as well as noting the extent of critical comments. It is also important to understand whether there is a climate of criticism being generated by the opposition elite or whether only one or a few brave souls are expressing reservations about the wisdom of some presidential action.

### **MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE IRAN-CONTRA AFFAIR<sup>3</sup>**

Our content analysis of the Iran-Contra affair coverage is drawn from the *New York Times* and the CBS Evening News. We measured space and location in the paper and timed stories on the news broadcast. In both media, we took note of the comments of foreign policy elites, determined whether the comments were critical, neutral, or supportive of the president, and measured the space/time devoted to critical commentary. From these measurements of criticism, the criticism of foreign spokespersons is excluded, but space/time devoted to stories that include such criticism is included in our measures of total coverage.

An abbreviated presentation of the content analysis is found in Table 1.<sup>4</sup> Here we present, grouped by week, the main news themes, the tenor of elite criticism, a list of the important foreign policy experts who criticized the Reagan Administration, and a measure of the amounts of news and elite criticism in the *New York Times* and on the CBS Evening News.

### **ELITE CRITICISM AND PUBLIC OPINION**

In order to understand the significance of the media coverage in the Iran-Contra affair, it is helpful to contrast it with news treatment of the Reykjavik Summit meetings just three weeks earlier. The outcome of the summit was portrayed as a policy failure, yet it was the occasion for a rally in

TABLE 1. News Coverage and Elite Commentary on the Iran-Contra Affair

Week	News Coverage	Tone of Criticism	Critical Elites	NYT Criticism (in.)	NYT News (in.)	CBS Criticism (min.)	CBS News (min.)
I. Nov. 3-9	<p>Hostage Jacobsen released. Intimations of U.S. military and economic concessions to Iran. Administration urges press to restrain from speculation. Unbriefed House and Senate announce plans for investigation.</p>	<p>First critical remarks appear 11/6. Congressmen remain unbriefed and many seem uncertain how to react. Schultz reportedly opposed to arms deal. Examples: The Administration "can't do this and retain any credibility in the world" (Warren Christopher). Once again, Reagan has "galloped into credibility gulch" through his use of the NSC (Terrence Smith). "Now for the first time, you begin to see paramilitary operations run out of the White House and that is madness" (Sen. Moynihan).</p>	<p>Warren Christopher Sen. Robert Byrd Jody Powell Henry Kissinger Sen. Patrick Leahy Sen. Daniel Moynihan George Schultz Terrence Smith</p>	15.4	263.3	1.6	23.0
II. Nov. 10-16	<p>Administration attempts to close ranks while denying wrongdoing. President briefs Congress for first time on 11/12 and gives public speech on 11/13. News coverage provides few new details of operation and concentrates on defensive actions of Administration.</p>	<p>Schultz's disagreement noted again. Criticism focused on loss of U.S. credibility and amateur nature of the operation. Sources within the Administration acknowledge that arms deals had damaged Reagan's credibility. Congress angered by lack of notification. Examples: Arms deal considered the "biggest mistake the president has made in a long time" (Sen. Goldwater) and a "major foreign policy blunder" (Sen. Byrd). "Everyone . . . Republicans as well as Democrats, can't understand how the Administration made this decision" (Robert Strauss).</p>	<p>Sen. Sam Nunn Sen. Robert Byrd David Aaron Sen. Barry Goldwater Sen. Patrick Leahy Rep. Jim Wright Robert Strauss Rep. Tip O'Neill Rep. David McCurdy Zbigniew Brzezinski Sen. Joseph Biden</p>	198.1	798.4	3.5	29.5

TABLE 1. (Continued)

Week	News Coverage	Tone of Criticism	Critical Elites	NYT Criticism (in.)	NYT News (in.)	CBS Criticism (min.)	CBS News (min.)
III. Nov. 17-23	Coverage highlights upcoming Congressional hearings. Reagan announced a halt to arms deals with Iran on 11/18. Reagan holds press conference on 11/19. New revelations reported as to how U.S. managed to send the arms to Iran through Israel. Congress tries to tighten its control over covert actions.	Criticism is increasingly bipartisan in nature. McFarlane now says arms shipments were a mistake. Many are skeptical of the President's judgment and his insistence that arms were "strictly defensive." Inability of Administration to stem in-fighting criticized in and out of Congress. Examples: Public is witnessing the "disintegration of American foreign policy" (Zbigniew Brzezinski). The operation was "ill-conceived and ineptly implemented" (Sen. Nunn). Reagan is left with the broader problem of demonstrating that he "does still have the grip on that office" (David Gergen). "I think the President is in a difficult spot and we've really got a credibility problem here" (Sen. Chaffee).	James Schlesinger Zbigniew Brzezinski Sen. Bill Bradley Sen. Sam Nunn Rep. Richard Cheney Robert McFarlane David Gergen Sen. Richard Lugar Sen. John Chaffee Sen. George Mitchell Sen. Robert Byrd Sen. John Stennis Sen. John Glenn Sen. Dale Bumpers	227.3	918.4	14.7	22.0
IV. Nov. 24-30	Reagan insists arms deals "good idea." Reagan and Meese disclose that money from arms sales went to Contras 11/25. Poindexter and North leave their jobs. Possibility that North shredded documents disclosed 11/27. Three-man Tower Board named by President.	Reagan supporters call for Cabinet resignations. Aspersions cast on Reagan's ability to control staff. Criticism becomes muted after 11/27 as Democrats worry about appearing too prosecutorial. Examples: "No major accomplishments [emerged] from the secret arms sales" (John Whitehead). If Reagan didn't know about money transfer then something was "profoundly wrong" (Rep. Jim Wright). However, "we must work to help the President restore credibility" (Sen. Nunn).	Sen. Sam Nunn Sen. D'Amato Rep. Jim Wright Sen. Robert Dole Sen. Jack Kemp David Gergen Arthur Schlesinger Rep. Les Aspin Anthony Lewis John Whitehead	138.1	1097.7	8.9	43.0

public support for President Reagan. The polls bracketing the Reykjavik Summit meeting show a 4-percentage-point increase in aggregate public approval of "President Reagan's handling of his job as president" (*New York Times*/CBS News Poll, 10/24–28/86, p. 11). This 4-percentage-point increase in public approval is larger than the median value—an increase of 3 percentage points in presidential approval—for the 65 post-World War II events that satisfy the Mueller-Kernell criteria (Brody and Shapiro, 1989, pp. 85–86). In other words, the Reykjavik Summit occasioned an average-size rally.

Our review of the news coverage for the period of the summit shows that elite commentary critical of the president's policy proposals was virtually absent. This absence was not for want of attention to the summit: From October 13 to October 19, 1986, the *New York Times* devoted nearly one-fifth (18.6%) of its front-page lineage to the summit and its aftermath. Front-page lineage is a scarce resource and this much space devoted to one issue signals the reader that the editors consider the issue to be very important. CBS News gave the same signal by devoting more than a fifth (21.5%) of its total broadcast time to the summit and its aftermath.<sup>5</sup>

In neither medium was much space devoted to elite criticism of presidential policy at the summit or on arms control. The *Times* used about one-quarter of one percent of its front-page lineage to report elite criticism. CBS devoted less than one percent of its broadcast time (.85%) to elite commentary critical of the summit outcome, which is not much criticism, but it is more than three times the attention devoted to elite criticism in the *Times*. Even so, the viewer would have to be paying very close attention to notice opinion leadership critical of the president.

This aggregate evidence is entirely consistent with the opinion leadership theory of the rally phenomenon. The public was presented with a large volume of news about the summit and very little criticism from credible elites. Despite the failure of presidential policy and the large volume of "bad" news—from the perspective of presidential goals (Brody, 1986a)—in the absence of criticism from opinion leaders, the public at large increased its approval of the way President Reagan was doing his job.

The data on the summit are mute on the patriotism theory of the rally. Quite simply, we cannot say anything on the question of whether or not people would have felt disloyal expressing disapproval of the president. We have to consider the possibility that the manifest presence of a large volume of criticism by Soviet officials, rather than the absence of criticism by American opinion leaders, is responsible for the rally. This is a species of the patriotism hypothesis based on a cognitive consistency mechanism, which would point to the psychological discomfort involved in making common cause with the adversary. Clearly, this explanation is plausible. In the case

of the Reykjavík Summit, we cannot choose between the opinion leadership and cognitive consistency explanations. However, we have reached a tentative conclusion about their relative plausibility through an examination of aggregate data on the Iran-Contra affair.

The Iran-Contra affair was in the news for a much longer period than was the story of the Reykjavík summit, but if we take this difference into account, the relative amounts of attention to the two events are remarkably similar. One-fourth (25.4%) of total broadcast time on CBS News—between November 3 and November 30, 1986—was given to the Iran-Contra affair; the summit consumed 21.5% of CBS's broadcast during the period. The differences in the coverage of the two events, on CBS, comes in the volume of elite criticism reported to the American people. As we have reported, elite criticism was a minor part of the coverage of the Reykjavík Summit. On CBS News, less than 4% of the time spent covering the summit was devoted to elite criticism by American political leaders. By contrast, elite criticism took up more than 24% of the CBS News time devoted to the arms scandal in the first four weeks. In the *New York Times*, elite criticism comprised less than 1% of the total space devoted to the summit but such criticism was more than 20% of the total coverage of the Iran-Contra affair in these early weeks.

Given the volume of comment critical of the Iran-Contra affair and the 21-percentage-point drop in “approval of the president’s handling of his job”—in the *New York Times*/CBS News Polls of October 24–28 and November 30, 1986—there would seem to be a strong case for the validity of the opinion leadership hypothesis. Moreover, it should be noted that public support declined in spite of prominently reported, frequent, and shrill attacks on the president and the United States by the leadership of the fundamentalist revolution in Iran. The cognitive consistency version of the patriotism hypothesis does not appear to be valid in this case. Any psychological stress stemming from making common cause with the adversary did not appear to deter a large group of Americans from changing their opinion of President Reagan’s job performance.

However, there is another rival to the opinion leadership hypothesis that must be considered. To be sure, the Iran-Contra affair was the occasion for a large volume of elite critical commentary but it was also the occasion for an even larger volume of news—much of it bad news—on this issue, which suggests the possibility that simply the accumulation of news, and not opinion leadership, caused the changes in public support. Krosnick and Kinder (1988) conclude from their study of the public’s response to the Iran-Contra affair that the volume of news during this period primed the public to focus on these events in deciding anew whether to approve or disapprove of President Reagan’s job performance. Krosnick and Kinder

demonstrate that the coverage of these events raised questions about the president's "integrity" rather than his "competence" (1988, p. 7). However, the priming hypothesis does not specify the links between focusing public attention and generating affect. We hypothesize that it is not the volume of coverage, per se, that generates affect but the volume and type of comments from legitimate political elites in the coverage that guides the public response.

From aggregate data on public opinion at only two points in time, we cannot choose between the opinion leadership and priming hypotheses but we can take advantage of another data set—the 1986 American National Election Study (NES)—to help us make that choice.<sup>6</sup>

In customary fashion the NES began its field work for the 1986 mid-term election survey immediately after election day on November 4. We will make use of data gathered by the field staff in the first five weeks, that is, from November 5 to December 7, 1986. At the outset we must acknowledge that the study was not designed with this use in mind. Only a single sample was drawn. For our purposes, a series of weekly random replicates would have been desirable. However, an examination of the demographic composition of the weekly groupings indicates that only educational attainment varies systematically over the selected weeks; there is a higher proportion of respondents whose schooling stopped before high school in the first two weeks of the study than in the next three weeks.

Our procedure is straightforward: We divide the respondents, interviewed in the first five weeks of field work, into weekly groupings and treat each group as if it was exposed to two types of information related to the Iran-Contra affair, namely, the total volume of news on the affair in the previous week and the volume of news carrying reports of elite criticism in the previous week. In other words, the two news measures are treated as the policy information context for the respondent. The trends of these two information measures are presented in Figures 1 and 2, which report the total volume of news on the Iran-Contra affair and the volume of elite criticism in the *New York Times* and on CBS News respectively. The contexts vary on the amounts of total coverage and on the amounts of criticism and, happily, since we are seeking to separate the effects of total coverage and criticism, the two quantities do not systematically covary.

*New York Times* coverage of the Iran-Contra affair increased steadily week-by-week; on CBS there was a small decline in total coverage during the third week of the incident. Reports of elite criticism followed a similar path in both media; these reports peaked in the third week and dropped off, to some extent, after the president's and Attorney General Meese's disclosures on November 25, that approximately \$30 million from the

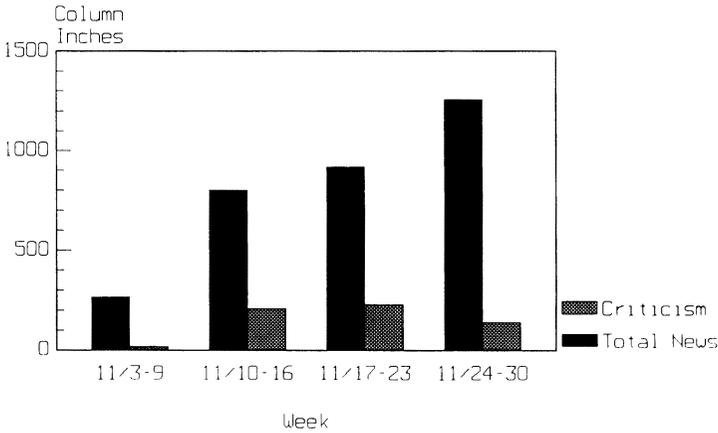


FIG. 1. *New York Times* coverage of the Iran-Contra affair: November 1986.

Iranian arms sales had been funneled to the Contras via a series of Swiss bank accounts.

Compared to the week preceding the revelation of the Contra link, elite criticism after November 25 was not only muted but also came less often from those inside government. There were some critical remarks about the Meese disclosure, but, considering the drama of the announcement, the reactions seem muted. Correspondent Phil Jones noted that a fear for the nation and for the presidency itself had prompted a curious sort of congressional rally around the presidency. To illustrate this point, Senator Nunn was presented saying, "We must work to help the president restore

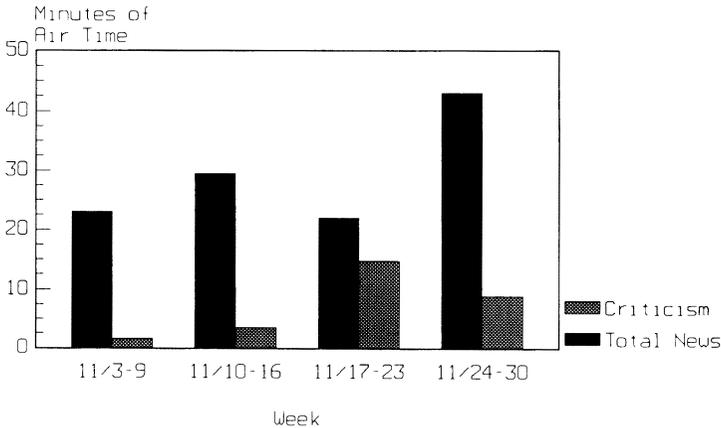


FIG. 2. CBS TV News coverage of the Iran-Contra affair: November 1986.

credibility.” We still find some bipartisan criticism but most Republican officials appeared to be pulling back from the blanket condemnation they had expressed earlier.

To determine whether either or both of the aforementioned aspects of news affected public evaluations of President Reagan, we made them a part of analyses designed to account for such evaluations. We specify a two-stage causal model: At the first stage the dependent variable is the affective response to President Reagan, represented by the NES “feeling thermometer.” At the second stage, the dependent variable is the NES replicate of the Gallup Poll and *New York Times*/CBS News Poll item, which queries whether the respondent “approves” or “disapproves” of the “way President Reagan is handling his job as president.” The independent variables are the two weekly news content measures, attitudes toward aid to the Contras, gender, partisanship, ideology, political interest, and media use. We include the last five variables with the expectation that in anytime period they would affect public response to President Reagan. Without them we cannot properly specify the impact of news volume and elite criticism on evaluations of the president. Since general attitude toward President Reagan is measured with a 100-point scale, we used ordinary least squares regression analysis to estimate the first stage of the model; the second stage of the model is estimated with probit analysis.

We use education as a primary control variable because of its nonrandom distribution across the five weeks of the study and because other studies have shown that the causal structure of political attitudes is different for those with different levels of educational attainment (Sniderman, Brody, and Kuklinski, 1984; Sniderman et al., 1986). We estimated the causal models separately for each of three educational attainment groups—namely, those with less than a high school education, those whose schooling ended with high school, and those whose schooling went beyond high school. The three sections of Figure 3 present these analyses.<sup>7</sup>

Against the background of factors that are generally thought to relate to positive affect for President Reagan, how do our two measures of media content perform? For the least well-educated, neither measure is directly related to the likelihood of approval of President Reagan’s handling of his job as president. Both are indirectly related through their impact on the citizen’s general opinion of the president. Affect toward Reagan responds to the total volume of news; the more time that CBS News devoted to the incident in a given week, the lower the general opinion was of the president held by those interviewed in the following week. Clearly, these respondents are “primed” by news coverage but it is not clear what segment of the news produces the negative affect. It is not elite criticism; contrary to our

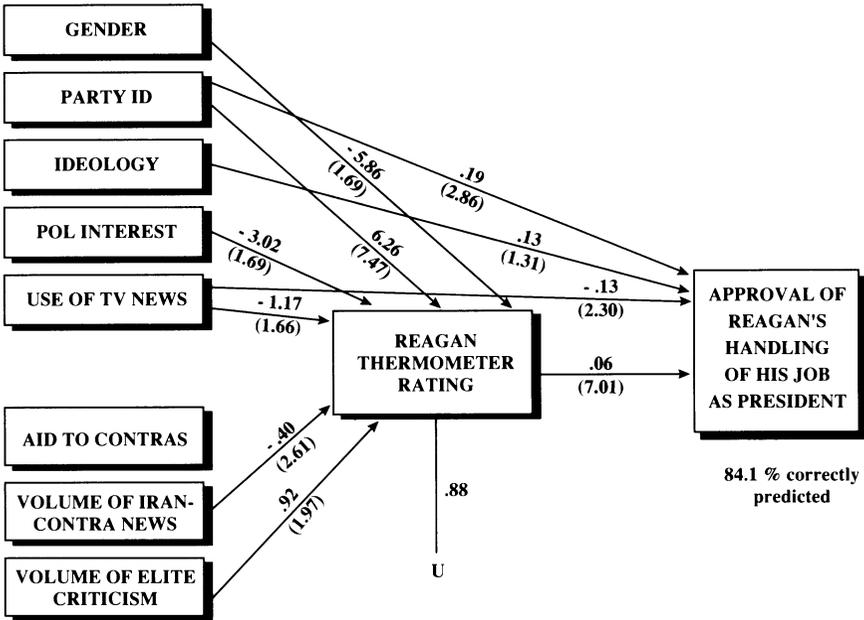


FIG. 3a. Structure of opinion for those with less than high school education.

expectation, in this group, criticism is associated with positive affect for President Reagan.

Those who finished high school but did not go beyond it in their schooling present a different structure of opinion than the group that did not complete high school. Having taken into account factors normally expected to affect opinion of the president, we find that the middle education group provides support for the “opinion leadership” hypothesis. The volume of news on the Iran-Contra affair is unrelated to opinions of President Reagan at either the first or second stage the model. But the volume of elite criticism is related to the probability of approving of the president’s handling of his job as president. Every minute of elite criticism in a given week reduced the probability that members of the public, in this education group, would register approval of President Reagan.

Americans with the highest level of education appear to take their cues from opinion leaders and not from the general news climate. The greater the volume of elite criticism carried on CBS Evening News in a given week, the lower was the probability that a respondent interviewed the following week would express approval of President Reagan’s handling of his job as president. Elite criticism has an effect on approval both directly and

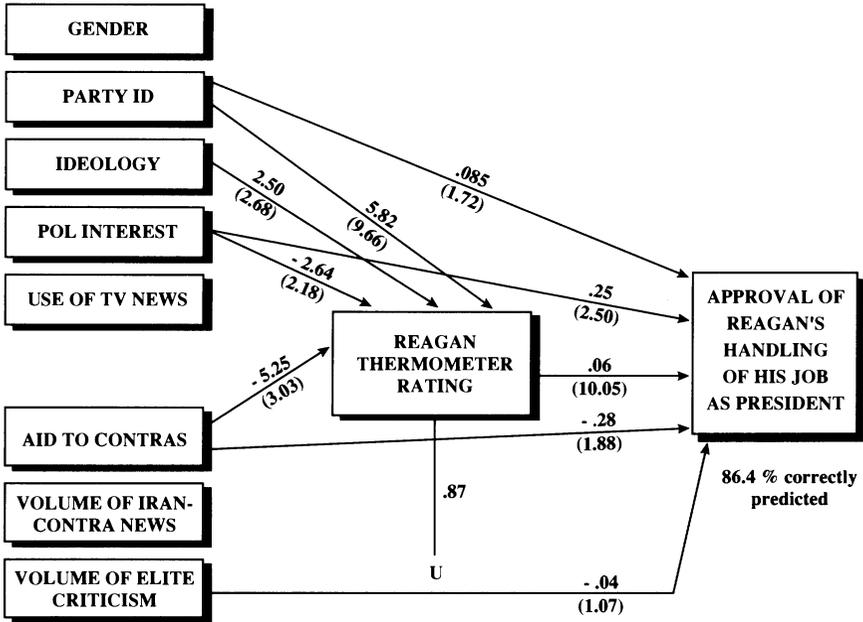


FIG. 3b. Structure of opinion for those with high school education.

indirectly through its erosion of the respondent's general affect toward the president.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Bearing in mind that there is a limit to the understanding that one can gain from a single case study, we have argued here that examination of the Iran-Contra affair provides more evidence in support of the opinion leadership hypothesis than in support of either the patriotism or the priming (i.e., news volume) hypotheses. Moreover, the cognitive consistency version of the patriotism hypothesis is at odds with the public response to the Iran-Contra affair. The public did not rally despite the barrage of negative comments from Iranian leaders about whom most Americans feel antipathy, which is consistent with our earlier study that cast serious doubts on the ability of the patriotism hypothesis, as presently formulated, to generate accurate predictions. (Brody and Shapiro, 1989). The individual-level survey data provide little support for the priming hypothesis and substantial support for the opinion leadership hypothesis.

These findings and the hypothesis they support suggest that the

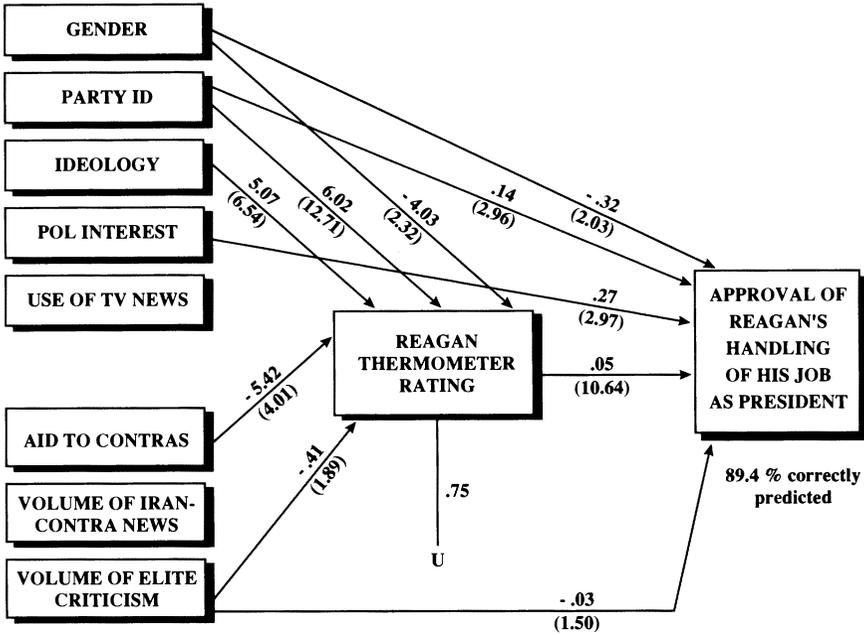


FIG. 3c. Structure of opinion for those with more than high school education.

American public can and does use available information in reaching its assessment of presidential performance. But foreign policy is esoteric; most Americans have difficulty understanding the meaning of foreign policy events and crises exacerbate this difficulty. Crises in foreign policy present problems for the political elite as well as for the public. These problems may not be understanding the events but difficulties in anticipating public response and, therefore, in deciding which public stance will be politically most advantageous. This indecision, and the caution it breeds, can and usually does lead to silence or near silence; if most opinion leaders take this stance, a rally is likely to follow. Occasionally, opinion leaders—for reasons that have yet to be investigated—feel secure enough or are driven enough to publicly pronounce their opposition; if many opinion leaders take this stance, a rally is unlikely to follow.

NOTES

1. This situation gives rise to the need to account for the conditions that encourage or discourage elite criticism. We believe that this account can only be developed through a quite detailed comparison of a large number of crisis events. The comparison is a study that

- remains to be done and until it is done our account of the sources of the rally phenomenon will remain incomplete.
2. Key members of the staff of these committees also are treated as sources but are seldom identified by name, either because of their own reluctance or because the reporter or editor believes that the name will contribute less credibility than the mention of the staff role.
  3. The content of CBS News was drawn from tapes archived at Vanderbilt University. We also reviewed the news abstracts for ABC and NBC to satisfy ourselves that relying solely on CBS would not materially affect our results.
  4. The density of coverage of the Iran-Contra affair and the limitations of space require that we organize our summaries weekly and in a highly abstracted form. Obviously, this presentation eliminates much detail; however, our statistical summaries are drawn from the full media record. Those who wish to examine a more complete recapitulation of the news coverage are invited to write to the authors.
  5. With television news it is easy to determine the total news hole: It averages 22 minutes per day and deviates only slightly from this average. For the *New York Times*, time comparisons of the total news hole are less meaningful. The total news hole expands and contracts with the weekly advertising cycle and has less to do with news, per se, than does time devoted to a given topic on television. However, front-page lineage is fixed, so we can use that fact to make meaningful comparisons of attention to a given topic.
  6. The data used in these analyses were made available by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Neither the Consortium nor the original collectors of the data are responsible for the analyses or conclusions presented here.
  7. For the sake of visual clarity only paths that are statistically significant ( $p < .10$ ) are presented. We employ one- or two-tailed probabilities as appropriate to our hypotheses: For party ID, ideology, aid to the Contras, and the two content analysis measures we hypothesize an expected sign and use a one-tailed test of significance. For gender, political interest, and the use of television news we do not hypothesize a sign and use two-tailed tests. Unstandardized regression and probit coefficients are presented above the arrows and without parentheses. *T*-ratios are presented below the arrows and enclosed by parentheses. Interitem correlations for the nine initial independent variables are omitted from the figures.

## REFERENCES

- Brody, Richard A. (1986a). Daily news and the dynamics of support for the president. Paper delivered at the 1986 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, Eugene, Oregon, March 21, 1986.
- Brody, Richard A. (1986b). A reconsideration of the rally phenomenon in public opinion. Paper delivered at the 1986 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., August 28–31, 1986.
- Brody, Richard A., and Shapiro, C. R. (1989). A reconsideration of the rally phenomenon in public opinion. In S. Long (ed.), *Political Behavior Annual, Volume 2*. Denver: Westview Press.
- Iyengar, S., and Kinder, D. R. (1987). *News That Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Iyengar, S., Kinder, D. R., Peters, M. D., and Krosnick, J. A. (1984). The evening news and presidential evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46: 778–787.

- Kernell, S. H. (1978). Explaining presidential popularity. *American Political Science Review* 72: 506–522.
- Krosnick, J. A., and Kinder, D. R. (1988). Altering the foundations of popular support for the president through priming: Reagan, the Iran-Contra affair, and the American public. Paper presented at the 1988 Annual Meeting of the Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.
- Lee, J. R. (1977). Rallying 'round the flag. *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 7: 252–256.
- Mueller, J. (1973). *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*. New York: Wiley.
- Sniderman, P. M., Brody, R. A., and Kuklinski, J. H. (1984). Policy reasoning on political issues: The issue of racial equality. *American Journal of Political Science* 28: 75–94.
- Sniderman, P. M., Hagen, M. G., Tetlock, P. E., and Brady, H. E. (1986). Reasoning chains: Causal models of policy reasoning in mass publics. *British Journal of Political Science* 16: 405–430.